The majority of technical professionals in the public works sector do not make a conscious decision to become a leader. When they enter into university as an undergraduate, they embark on a program of study which has a heavy technical focus. They enter the workforce, gain experience and expertise then over time their technical competence is recognised. And before long, they find themselves in a position of leadership. While some will rise to the occasion and function well in their new positions, others flounder.

Decision makers often assume that a person who demonstrates technical competency and performs well in their job is likely to have leadership and management potential. As a result, many new leaders find themselves in roles for which they are entirely unprepared. In reality, leadership and management require skillsets that are significantly different to the tasks performed as a functional expert.

In many cases, a new leader will choose to govern their team by focusing on the substance of their role and minimising or avoiding the human and managerial elements entirely. Unfortunately, it is exactly those dimensions of their new roles that form the heart and foundation of good leadership. Since a leadership role depends on achieving results through others, the critical element that defines a successful manager is the application of effective interpersonal skills.

By talking to a number of technical leaders across our sector, it appears that the root of the problem is in where to place the emphasis: in technical or in ‘leader’? A leader without sufficient technical background will often struggle to earn the respect of the team. A technician without leadership skills is ineffective and can create havoc within the organisation. These observations raise several questions: Is leadership in a technical arena different than generic leadership? Must leadership development be carried out differently for a technical audience?

In reality, an effective technical leader has the same core leadership skills of communication, relationship building, empowerment and self-awareness. These are traits that may not come naturally to the majority of people. Succeeding in a leadership role can be a challenge, requiring new perspectives, another area of knowledge, different skillsets and personality traits. Success will often require making decisions, not based on logic and analysis but utilising the ‘soft skills’ of listening, understanding personal relationships, human interaction and empathy.

The good news is leadership skills can be improved if the individual is willing to be self-reflective and make a real effort to learn. The most important factor in increasing knowledge and skills is the willingness to learn. A successful outcome can be directly related to how motivated the individual was to lead in the first place. When someone is not quite ready and willing, they will likely stick their head in the sand and either ignore their role as leader or assume a ‘stock’ leadership position such as being authoritarian.

New technical leaders —especially those who feel hesitant about leading—need to recognise they feel unprepared or ill-equipped to assume a leadership role and translate these concerns into motivation to improve their skillset.

The bottom line is that promotions to positions of technical leadership, while celebrated initially, can soon lead to failure if one does not take the time to assess their strengths and weaknesses as a leader, and
show willingness to change their approach and enhance their knowledge and skillset when necessary.

IPWEAQ has developed the Leadership Toolkit Series to assist individuals, teams and organisations realise their potential and assist in the transition from technical professional to successful leader. Some of the topics covered in the program include:

- The emerging leader
- Effective communication
- Influencing others
- Personal development
- Team development
- Performance management
- Leadership and accountability
- Strategic thinking
- Operational planning

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- The Leadership Toolkit Series